

In their ornamentation, with which the world is so familiar through the numerous manufactured articles of every kind which have been imported into this country, they do not appear to have gone beyond that point which is reached by every people in an early stage of civilisation: their art, such as it is, is fixed, and is subject neither to progression nor retrogression. In the conception of pure form they are even behind the New Zealander; but they possess, in common with all Eastern nations, the happy instinct of harmonising colours. As this is more a faculty than an acquirement, it is just what we should expect; the arriving at an appreciation of pure form is a more subtle process, and is the result of either more highly endowed natural instincts, or of the development of primitive ideas by successive generations of artists improving on each other's efforts.

The general forms of many of the Chinese porcelain vases are remarkable for the beauty of their outline, but not more so than the rude water-bottles of porous clay which the untutored Arabian potter fashions daily on the banks of the Nile, assisted only by the instincts of his gentle race; and the pure form of the Chinese vases is often destroyed by the addition of grotesque or other unmeaning ornaments, built up upon the surface, not growing from it: from which we argue, that they can possess an appreciation of form, but in a minor degree.

In their decoration, both painted and woven, the Chinese exhibit only just so much art as would belong to a primitive people. Their most successful efforts are those in which geometrical combinations form the basis; but even in these, whenever they depart from patterns formed by the intersection of equal lines they appear to have a very imperfect idea of the distribution of spaces. Their instinct of colour enables them, in some measure, to balance form, but when deprived of this aid they do not appear to be equally successful. The diapers on Plate LXIX. will furnish us with examples. Patterns 1, 8, 13, 18, 19, being generated by figures which ensure an equal distribution, are more perfect than Nos. 2, 4-7, 41, where the arrangement depends more upon caprice; on the other hand, Nos. 28, 33, 35, 49, and the other patterns of this class on the Plate, are examples in which the instinct of the amount of balancing colour required would determine the mass. The Chinese share with the Indian this happy power in their woven fabrics; and the tone of the ground of any fabric is always in harmony with the quantity of ornament which it has to support. The Chinese are certainly colourists, and are able to balance with equal success both the fullest tones of colour and the most delicate shades.

They are not only successful in the use of the primaries, but also of the secondaries and tertiaries; most successful, perhaps, of all in the management of the lighter tones of pure colours,—pale blue, pale pink, pale green, prevailing.

Of purely ornamental or conventional forms, other than geometric patterns, the Chinese possess but very few. On Plate LX. are some examples in 1-3, 5, 7, 8. They have no flowing conventional ornament—such as we find in all other styles; the place of this is always supplied by a representation of natural flowers interwoven with lineal ornament: such as Nos. 17, 18, Plate LXI.; or of fruit, see Plate LXII. In all cases, however, their instinct restrains them within the true limit; and although the arrangement is generally unnatural and unartistic, they never, by shades and shadows, as with us, violate consistency. In their printed paper-hangings, the whole treatment, both of figures, landscape and ornament, is so far conventional, that however we may feel it to be unartistic, we are not shocked by an overstepping of the legitimate bounds of decoration. In their floral patterns, moreover, they always observe the natural laws of radiation from the parent stem, and tangential curvature; it could not well be otherwise, as the peculiarity of the Chinese is their fidelity in copying; and we hence infer that they must be close observers of nature. It is the taste to idealise upon this close observation which is wanting.

We have already referred in the Greek chapter to the peculiarities of the Chinese fretwork. No.

1, Plate LXI., is a continuous meander like the Greek; Nos. 2-9, 18, specimens of irregular frets; No. 4, Plate LX., a curious instance of a fret with a curved termination.

On the whole, Chinese ornament is a very faithful expression of the nature of this peculiar people; its characteristic feature is oddness,—we cannot call it capricious, for caprice is the playful wandering of a lively imagination; but the Chinese are totally unimaginative, and all their works are accordingly wanting in the highest grace of art,—the ideal.